

## Against the Grain

---

Volume 29 | Issue 5

Article 18

---

November 2017

# Booklover-Deciphering and Archiving History

Donna Jacobs

[donna.jacobs55@gmail.com](mailto:donna.jacobs55@gmail.com)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Jacobs, Donna (2017) "Booklover-Deciphering and Archiving History," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 29: Iss. 5, Article 18.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.7846>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact [epubs@purdue.edu](mailto:epubs@purdue.edu) for additional information.

tales. Among the details I gleaned from this encyclopedic gathering were facts such as: **Lewis Carroll**, author of *Alice in Wonderland*, was actually an erudite pun on his real name of **Charles Lutwidge Dodgson**, meant to puzzle his fellow Oxford Dons.

And it was good to be reminded that the students in **Samuel Butler's** *Erewhon* attend "the Universities of Unreason, where nothing useful is taught, and any form of machinery is proscribed on the grounds that, if allowed to develop, the machines will take over society." I was also glad to have the various levels of society in *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* by **Edwin Abbott** spelled out as a satire on Victorian social norms where "...many-sided polygons constitute a kind of aristocracy and isosceles triangles form the working class, while regular quadrilaterals, like the narrator, are solidly middle class...while women, who are lines only, are unable to improve their station. In addition, women might be mistaken for 'points' when seen head on and are required to use separate doors and shout aloud when moving around Flatland, in order to avoid accidentally stabbing their countrymen."

Another work of fantasy that actually gave rise to a real world political movement is **Edward Bellamy's** *Looking Backward* (one of the bestselling books of all time in the U.S.). From this utopian novel came the People's Party which espoused that "...wealth be equally distributed and private property be abolished. Everyone would receive a college education and life-long care from a benevolent state where the retirement age is forty-five." On a more dystopian note, we learn that *We* by **Yevgeny Zamyatin** published in 1924 was a direct inspiration for 1984, *Brave New World*, and **Ursula Le Guin's** *The Dispossessed*. In *We* the "One State" is surrounded by a wall where the dictatorial "Benefactor" watches citizens at all times and they live in transparent apartments the better to be monitored.

I had missed the parallels between Jesus and the Little Prince in **Antoine De Saint-Exupéry's** *Little Prince*, where the "boy with golden hair and a scarf" tells the pilot "...the important thing is what can't be seen. And he dies to get back to his rose on asteroid B-612. The last image in the book shows a desert landscape with a star. The narrator asks us to let him know if we ever see this landscape, and under that star, a child. Don't let him go on being so sad: Send word immediately that he's come back."

Another important quality of *Literary Wonderlands* is that it introduces us to many foreign examples of the genre. The book gives equal recognition to works such as *Egalia's Daughters: A Satire of the Sexes* by **Gerd Mjoen Brantenberg**, *Obabakoak* by **Bernardo Atxaga**, *The Man with Compound Eyes* by **Wu Ming-Yi**, and *Wizard of the Crow* by **Ngugi Wa Thiong'O**.

You will find *Literary Wonderlands* a valuable scholarly look back at familiar books and a fresh look forward to more adventurous reading in the future. 🐾

## Booklover — Deciphering and Archiving History

Column Editor: **Donna Jacobs** (Retired, Medical University of South Carolina, Charleston, SC 29425) <donna.jacobs55@gmail.com>

**Roger Martin du Gard** graduated in 1906 from the *École des Chartes* in Paris, France with the degree of archivist-paleographer. This training provided **Martin du Gard** with an eye for detail and a passion for accurate documentation. Within seven years of graduation he found success as an author with the publication of *Jean Barois*. He was awarded the **Nobel Prize** in literature in 1937: "for the artistic power and truth with which he has depicted human conflict as well as some fundamental aspects of contemporary life in his novel-cycle *Les Thibault*."

**Martind du Gard's** literary work gave new meaning to the phrase "The Devil is in the details." Why he chose to execute his training through a literary channel is unclear; however the effects of the World Wars heavily influenced his themes. It is also of interest to note that **André Gide**, another Literature Laureate, was a long-term friend and mentor.

*The Operation* is a chapter from the third volume, *La belle saison*, of the roman-fleuve *Les Thibault*.

Sidebar: I confess I had to google roman-fleuve. The word is French for novel-stream or novel-cycle. *Britannica.com* defines it as a "series of novels, each one complete in itself, that deals with one central character, an era of national life, or successive generations of a family."

The story is a gem for illustrating **Martin du Gard's** fascination with detailing scenes of actions, interplay between characters, description of physical life albeit sometimes brutal and microscopically dissecting his characters. A young girl is hit and run over by a delivery truck in front of her home. The doctor is summoned to attend to her and must perform a life saving operation on sight, under lamp light, in a steamy living room, under the barometric tension of an impending thunderstorm, with the assistance of a young colleague, and the distraction of the inhabitants of the apartment.

The horrific scene is set for the reader in short sentences rich with graphic detail:

"The first thing Antoine noticed was the lamp which a woman in a pink dressing gown was lifting with both hands..."; "A young man wearing pince-nez, with his hat still on, was bending forward slitting up with a pair of scissors the blood-stained garments of the little girl." "...she was busy brushing off the flies that obstinately settled on her glowing cheeks..."; "Only an immediate operation," he said decisively, "can save her life. Let's try." And with that we are led through the story with surgical precision.

When **Martin du Gard** was awarded the **Nobel Prize** in 1937, he described himself "like an owl, suddenly roused from its nest and exposed to the daylight, whose eyes, used to the dark, are blinded by dazzling brightness." He continued in his award speech during the banquet held in December of that year to speak of the influences of other authors upon his literary thought process and his development as an author:

"I was still very young when I encountered, in a novel by the English writer **Thomas Hardy**, this reflection on one of his characters: 'The true value of life seemed to him to be not so much its beauty, as its tragic quality.' It spoke to an intuition deep within me, closely allied to my literary vocation. Ever since that time I have thought that the prime purpose of the novel is to give voice to the tragic element in life. Today I would add: the tragic element in the life of an individual, the tragedy of a 'destiny in the course of being fulfilled.' At this point I cannot refrain from referring to the immortal example of **Tolstoy**, whose books have had a determining influence on my development. The born novelist recognizes himself by his passion to penetrate ever more deeply into the knowledge of man and to lay bare in each of his characters that individual element of his life which makes each being unique. It seems to me that any chance of survival which a novelist's work may have rests solely on the quantity and the quality of the individual lives that he has been able to create in his books. But that is not all. The novelist must also have a sense of life in general; his work must reveal a personal vision of the universe. Here again **Tolstoy** is the great master. Each of his creatures is more or less secretly haunted by a metaphysical obsession, and each of the human experiences that he has recorded implies, beyond an inquiry into man, an anxious question about the meaning of life. I admit that I take pleasure in the thought that, in crowning my work as a novelist, the members of the **Swedish Academy** wished to pay indirect homage to my devotion to that unapproachable model and to my efforts to profit from the instruction of his genius."

**Martin du Gard** took his instruction well. 🐾

